

## Sarah Lange, Outdoor Recreation Planner



*Recreation Planner Sarah Lange at Mt. Rainier.*

### ***What do you do with the Forest Service?***

I am an outdoor recreation planner and the coordinator for Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie's wilderness and wild and scenic rivers programs, our congressionally designated areas. I work to make sure we're compliant with the federal laws that dictate how they manage those lands, coordinate long-range planning, and look for opportunities for partnerships and funding to advance stewardship.

### ***What's your day-to-day look like as a recreation planner?***

Every day is a little different, but I often have a mix of meetings and time dedicated to writing, research, and project planning. A lot of my work involves working with partner organizations but also with internal teams, so I have several projects that

require coordinating with other resource areas. For example with our long term plan comprehensive river management plan for the Middle Fork Snoqualmie and Pratt Rivers, I'm a team lead for our interdisciplinary team, so we might be having in-person meetings, or coordinating on documents and having phone calls to check in on progress, or deciding how we're going to approach different aspects of the plan and do the required analysis.

I spend a lot of time interpreting Forest Service policy and trying to understand what's required of us or what kind of space we have to operate in and make decisions in, so that's includes reading federal law, Forest Service policy, and sometimes case law or other guidance from peers or other agencies and trying to piece things together. So there's a lot of policy interpretation, there's a lot of meetings, there's every once in a while an occasion to get out in the field and actually visit the places that we're working on which is nice, but those are special treats.

### ***So would you say a lot of your work is this long-term planning?***

It's part of it, but we also have projects that come up with much shorter time horizons. For example, any time the forest is considering a prohibited use in a wilderness area such as using mechanized, motorized equipment, or installation of structures, I will help coordinate the minimum requirements analysis.

For instance, we receive proposals from partners like USGS, who wants to install seismic monitoring stations on Glacier Peak so they can monitor for volcanic eruptions. Because that's a designated wilderness area, we have to look at that project through the lens of the Wilderness Act, documenting rationale for why we should or should not take certain actions. I facilitate recommendations to the decision makers who, depending on the project, could be the Forest Supervisor, Regional Forester, and sometimes those things can go up to the Chief of the Forest Service. Those aren't necessarily always longer-term projects, sometimes it's a question of "should we build a bridge or not?" or "can we use chainsaws to clear this trail?", so there are different time scales.

***Can you share a little bit about your career path up to this point? What got you interested in this field?***

When I was in college, I pursued a combined major of environmental studies and writing. I was interested in writing and communicating about environmental and natural resource issues. I got out of school and ended up working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for a short period of time in the Red Wolf Recovery Program on the outer banks of North Carolina, coordinating communication needs for the endangered species recovery program. That was an internship that led to a temp job that led to needing to find another job about a year and a half later.

I was looking for work all over the country and took an AmeriCorps position at the Washington Water Trails Association here in Seattle. I had bought a sea kayak when I got out of college and was living in coastal North Carolina, and so the Water Trails Association was all about establishing these paddling routes, and I was like "well that would be interesting, that would be a fun thing to do for 10.5 months."

So I got into this outdoor recreation thing on a whim and I really didn't think it was going to be shaping the rest of my career and it totally has. I ended up staying with Water Trails for five years because it was interesting—we were working with land managers to design campsites and trails to have less of an impact on these islands and sensitive coastal shorelines, coordinating volunteers and events, and I was learning about the rules and regulations and tools that managers have to address management and recreation. So I came to appreciate this dimension of natural resources that's about providing opportunities for people to connect to the land but also in a way that is responsible. I guess I turned a leaf and realized that responsible outdoor recreation was actually very important to me and it became my part of my trajectory.

I ended up working with the Mountaineers, which reconnected me to outdoor recreation and connected me more directly with the Forest Service. I was working with the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie to develop a citizen science initiative to monitor weeds in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, I was weighing in on NEPA decisions that the forest was making, and I was involved in forest planning for the Okanogan-Wenatchee. I started to get involved with the Forest Service and found myself really wanting to learn more about public lands policy and management, so I left the Mountaineers and went to graduate school. I was able to come into the Forest Service through the Pathways student trainee route, as a graduate student. That's how I ended up here.

**Would you say that your position now is definitely something that you needed a Master's Degree for?**

The public administration program provided good prep for the kinds of stuff that I am doing. It's thinking about program evaluation, policy analysis, leadership, and process improvement. An MPA is kind of like the MBA for people who want to work in public service, so it adds a lot of value for the program manager level that I'm working in, where we're a few steps removed from the on the ground implementation. I do think my graduate work was helpful, but I also firmly believe that people can gain relevant experiences for this type of work without having to have a degree.

**What are the most enjoyable aspects of your job? The most challenging?**

I love working with a team when everything gels - when we wrestle with problems are working together as a unit to come up with solutions. One of the really good days that I can remember from the last couple years of work was when I organized a workshop that was for stakeholders that were interested in the long-term planning for the Middle Fork Snoqualmie River. We had participation from all sorts of state and county agencies, tribes, nonprofits, and a lot of different representatives coming together to participate in a half day workshop where we were delving into different resource values in small groups. It was satisfying to generate a bunch of great input that we could use for our planning efforts and to build those connections with folks.

I get a lot of satisfaction out of getting things done and I guess the flipside of that is it can be a big challenge to get things completed sometimes, just because of the slow nature of bureaucracy and our many priorities of the forest. We're a very diverse agency in terms of the sets of values that we manage for on the landscape and all the different priorities that we have to juggle. It can be disappointing to feel like we sometimes miss out on opportunities to do good work because we don't have the resources or capacity. But it also forces you to be creative, to get clear about what's important and what isn't, and to learn how to make your case when you think something needs more attention.

***Do you have any advice or insights for someone who is interested in exploring a career in public services/rec planning?***

It's important to get out there and try a bunch of different things and get different perspectives. Look for mentors. One of the things that was valuable for me was volunteering as the president of a nonprofit board, the Washington State Trails Coalition. I got to know a lot of people and grow a network throughout the state, and it was meaningful work and good leadership experience. It's kind of a side gig and takes a lot of energy, but whatever you're doing try to get involved in something bigger—beyond the agency you're working with at the time so you do have a broad network. The network is important because you're connecting with different potential mentors and people who can be resources when you're trying to find job openings or trying to get an insight on an agency culture. I'd say that's my biggest advice—get involved with a community organization.

It's an exciting time to get involved with the Forest Service, and a time of rapid change. My sense is that we are moving in a direction that having a broad skillset versus a specialized skillset is important -- being able to coordinate with partners, having really strong communication, planning, and organizational skills, versus being a technical expert in any one area. We still have a need for those technical experts, but it is good to have a broad skillset.